

# **"GIVE US THE BALLOT"**

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1957

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." He was speaking about peaceful protest against civil inequalities suffered by African Americans. What if becoming silent on things that mattered was the only choice one would ever experience because they could not vote? America has a compelling story surrounding the history of the right to vote. This story started with the Civil Rights Act of 1866 which restricted voting rights for African Americans. Later constitutional amendments and state enactments both gave and took away voting rights. One of the most powerful and persuasive orators and leaders during the Civil Rights movement was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King brought the struggles faced by the black community to the eyes of our government through non-violent protests. Voting is the backbone and foundation of democracy. Democracy is government by the people or through their elected representatives. Laws cannot be passed, and representatives cannot be elected without the vote of the people. In 1957, Dr. King delivered an important speech, "Give Us the Ballot", which expressed the importance of an individual's right to have a voice through voting, in order to live as part of a democracy. Our country's history is rich in both the struggles and achievements of civil rights activists such as Dr. King.

Dr. King is one of the most prominent civil rights activists and he is respected worldwide. He played a huge role in the fight for civil rights through non-violent protests and peaceful assembly. His involvement in the 1960's led to the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. This act ended the inequalities of segregation of blacks at work and school and unfair voter registration policies. The lack of these basic civil rights was brought to the government's attention through the movements that Dr. King

organized and led. One of his most famous peaceful protests was the "March on Washington". At this crusade he gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech; it also marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. The purpose of this march was to create pressure so Congress would pass the Civil Rights Act. There was concern that the protest would become violent, and marshals were placed in the midst of the protest. However, the protesters chose peaceful protest. This march was crucial to the black community to overcome the difficulties over equal rights to vote. Dr. King fought hard for black voter rights because he believed if one was unable to vote in a democratic society, their voice was not heard and everyone has a right to be heard.

Democracy means government by the people, for the people. Democracy gives rights to citizens to make laws by direct vote or indirectly through their elected representatives. Voting defines what it means to be a citizen and to have one's voice heard. The right to vote for all citizens is the heart and soul of a democracy. Citizens in some countries often women, don't have the right to vote. For instance, in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, it is against the law for women to vote. Those countries' governments are not democracies, because not everybody has a voice; it is not government by the people. America's governmental system is a democracy because we believe that everybody, no matter what race, gender, religion etc. should have equal representation and an equal voice. There is no democracy without the right to vote, therefore, this right is essential. Dr. King believed that in order to live as a democratic citizen, where there is respect for social equality, all people must have a voice and a vote, black or white. Not only is voting necessary and critical to our democratic government, voting also advances the ideals of the most fundamental documents written by our Founders.

America's founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, are essential to the creation of our democratic way of life. Voting enhances the values of these famous documents because giving citizens a voice in government through the power to vote illuminates the

morals outlined in the principles of both. These high morals are that all people should be equal with certain rights, including the right to vote. The Declaration was used by our Founders to assist in writing the Constitution, which is the supreme law of our country. The theme of "all men are created equal" runs strongly through both documents.

In conclusion, it has been shown the right to vote by all defines the democracy we have chosen to live in. Our country's voting history has been a struggle to many, especially the black community. Dr. King, one of the greatest civil activists, helped lead his people through peaceful protests to where the government realized that huge inequalities existed, especially in voting rights. He held strongly that one is not himself without the right to be heard by ballot; without this right, one is only the slave of those in power. One cannot be a democratic citizen without a voice in their government. This right to vote only enhances the thoughts and principles written by our Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. I believe Dr. King would be very proud of the progress our country has made with our diversified society and African Americans who have realized their potential. He would be amazed we have an African American president and several other notable blacks serving important positions in our government, such as the top attorney in the United States, Eric Holder. However, I think he would want to remind all people that fighting for what is right and just can be accomplished in a peaceful and respectful manner, rather than with violence – what a great legacy of justice and peace Dr. King has left for us all.

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